

Belarus Headlines

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Office for a Democratic
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VICE-CHAIRMAN OF THE EU PARLIAMENT DELEGATION FOR RELATIONS WITH BELARUS ALDIS KUSKIS: *Belarus not high enough on European agenda*

Interview with Vice-chairman of the EU Parliament Aldis Kuskis (series: *Face to face with Europe*)

"Aldis", - says Latvian MEP, vice-chairman of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with Belarus Aldis Kuskis when he picks up his phone. For him Belarusian issues are of keen interest, his involvement with the country goes under the slogan of the Soviet pioneers: "always ready". He is no professional but an expressive, warm-hearted politician; and his statements are tough enough to secure him a ban on entering Belarus.

- Mr. Kuskis, what is the season of the year you associate Belarus with?

- I would like to associate the people of Belarus with spring – they are already awoken, they are active and energetic. But the country itself is still cold and frozen, like a dead, snowy winter. This time of the year is risky for spring flowers. I can't call Alexander Lukashenko Ded Moroz (*traditional Santa Claus - Father Frost*, - *Belarus Headlines*) as he is of no positive character. But one shouldn't forget the laws of nature – they are immutable. Spring is bound to set in!

- Why do you take such an interest in what you call Belarusian winter? Is it more professional or personal?

- I am an independent person and attach great importance to freedom. The highest value I would

set on the freedom of choice. I feel that we should do whatever we can for any country of the world to let it be free to make choice. There is no need to travel far with such an intention, Belarus is our direct neighbour; we even had 50 years of common history. What I need, what I want, what I would like to do is to help my friends.

I can't say I discuss Belarus with my family every day. I can't even say I see my family every day. But we do discuss Belarusian matters: My wife would ask why we support this or that, ask about the projects, our involvement. But I am not that often at home and try not to talk about political issues.

- Do you have friends in Belarus?

- Well, I know many people in Belarus and would be glad to make new friends. Belarusians are an exciting nation – bright and talented. I met them in Riga,



Brussels and Strasbourg – as long as I am *persona non grata* for Belarusian authorities, I can't come to visit the country. The normal way would be for me to have the opportunity to come and learn more about the country, to be able to understand it better. If the authorities are afraid of me, then they fear that I could do what?

- What is your opinion on the press reports – is European media objective covering Belarus? And vice versa, is Belarusian media impartial writing about European affairs?

- There is no 100 percent impartiality on either side.

There is different level of understanding in Europe of what is happening, of the situation in Belarus. It is great but also quite normal. Journalists know more about the situation in Belarus than about Latvia or Portugal that are member counties of EU. For European journalists news is

Interview with Aldis Kuskis

bad news; and since something bad is always happening in Belarus, the media have professional interest to write about the country and cover it more often. But that's my feeling, I don't have the statistics.

To analyse the EU coverage in Belarus we need to differentiate between government-controlled papers, which make 90-100 percent, they give a few true facts and, for most part, tell lies. The information on Europe in the papers that are almost independent is more or less correct. Independent media is mostly internet-based. In Belarus, on the whole, the biggest part of the free press is in the Internet as it is difficult to control it there.

- As a member of European Parliament, in your view, could you do more for Belarus? Should you do less?

- There is no reason to do less, we always do the utmost. Personally I have different obligations, split into priorities. I work at the Committee on the Environment and Committee on

Transport and Tourism. Among the priorities of the national politics I understand it as my duty to explain the history of Latvia and the Baltic states to the colleagues, condemn the totalitarian nature of the Soviet communist regime, to do historical research. Ukraine is another foreign issue of mine.

I am not satisfied with the level of attention paid to Belarus, its placement on the European agenda. We do a lot. There more or less active phases involving strategic planning of the projects, their drawing-up, preparation, implementation. There is still a lot to do – Belarusian issue is not yet on the top of the agenda of EU institutions.

Aldis Kuskis has been Latvian representative in the European Parliament (Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats), Vice-

There is still a lot to do – Belarusian issue is not yet on the top of the agenda of EU institutions.

Chairman of Delegation for relations with Belarus since 2004.

Born in 1965, Riga. 1981-1995 worked part-time as a DJ, 1996-2002 held different managing posts at advertising agency

"Lowe Age", then at telecommunication company "Baltkom". October 2002 – March 2004 Member of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia. Since March 2004 Secretary of

International Affairs of the Latvian national, conservative party "New Era". Speaks Latvian, English, Russian. Married, has a son and a daughter.

Prepared by Maryna Rakhlei for the Office for a Democratic Belarus

04/07/2007

Politics and Society

Venezuela's Chavez Meets Lukashenko for One-to-One Talks

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez arrived in Belarus Friday as part of a three-country non-aligned nation trip.

The outspoken Venezuelan leader was in one-on-one talks with Belarusian President Aleksander Lukashenko.

Chavez had visited Russia's parliament - the Duma - earlier in the day, and met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday.

The Friday arrival in Minsk was Chavez's second visit to Belarus. His schedule included also a subsequent stop in Iran - like Belarus a country politically isolated from major Western nations.

Belarus and Venezuela have seen

an upturn in trade recently, with Belarusian industry providing the Venezuelan army with night vision devices and an agreement for Belarusian energy companies to develop a Venezuelan oil field.

"Our positions are absolutely identical," a beaming Lukashenko told reporters. "Our relations have now reached the level of strategic partnership."

Lukashenko and Chavez were set to chair a joint meeting of Belarusian and Venezuelan delegations later in the evening.

Aside from energy industry equipment and military supplies, goods and services newly traded between the two countries include fertilizer, heavy dump trucks, lorries, tractors, and agricultural products.

"We, together with Belarus, are going forward with a 'wide front', and we have developed this trade in less than a year, after starting practically from zero," Lukashenko said.

During his visit to Moscow Chavez told reporters his country was interested in purchasing Russian diesel-electric submarines. He also called for greater cooperation between Venezuela's energy industry, and the Russian fossil fuel giants Gazprom and Lukoil.

29/06/2007

Source: Journalo

Politics and Society

Milinkevich's Movement for Freedom to Launch Information Campaign about Assistance that Could be Available under European Union's Neighbourhood Policy

The Movement for Freedom led by former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich on June 30 launched a campaign to inform the public about the assistance that Belarus may get under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

According to Mr. Milinkevich's press office, the Movement's activists will pass out pamphlets about what the EU can offer to Belarus and inform people about the benefits that the nation could get from the rapprochement with the EU.

This campaign "is highly important and necessary on the way to the future

partnership of Belarus with the family of European nations," Mr. Milinkevich was quoted as saying. "The EU's offers remain highly topical for us. Propagandists allege all the time that we can't rely on the EU because we are not welcome in Europe. On the contrary, Belarus is welcome in the European Union, the EU will welcome democratic changes in our country."

In November 2006, the European Union released a document specifying benefits that the bloc could offer to Belarus in exchange for Minsk's steps to democratize the country. The EU promised that Belarus would become

a full participant of the ENP if Minsk respected human rights, democracy and rule of law. In particular, the EU offered assistance in creating new trade opportunities to boost the Belarusian economy and create more and better job opportunities, improving the quality of healthcare and education, improving transport and energy networks, and the management of environmental problems, as well as reforming the legal and judicial system.

01/07/2007

Source: **BelaPAN**

Belarus Vows Cooperation With Russia in Opposing Plans for US Missile Shield

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko says his government will set aside economic disputes and work closer with Russia to oppose U.S. and NATO plans for a missile shield in central Europe.

In an address in Minsk Tuesday, Mr. Lukashenko said NATO's eastward expansion and the proposed missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic

would "seriously complicate" the military-political situation in the region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has voiced strong opposition to the missile shield. He has proposed alternatives to the U.S. plan, including joint use of a radar site in Azerbaijan, or alternately in southern Russia. Washington is evaluating those proposals.

Mr. Lukashenko is barred from traveling to the United States and many European countries because of his human rights policies. His comments today were made during a speech at a military parade marking Belarusian independence day.

03/07/2007

Source: **VOA News**

Belarusian Leader Promises Weapons Cooperation with Iran



Belarus' president promised aid to Iran's military Thursday, and held talks with the visiting Iranian defense chief.

"Our cooperation with Iran in the military-technical sphere is based on the development, above all, of high technologies," Alexander Lukashenko said during a meeting with Mostafa Mohammad Najjar.

He also said that Belarus would implement contracts it had signed with Iran, but it was unclear whether he was talking about weapons sales or other trade deals. Belarusian officials declined to comment.

Najjar said that "Belarus holds a special position in Iran's foreign policy" and that "cooperation between Belarus and Iran is developing thanks to mutual understanding on the presidential level."

Less than two months ago, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad traveled to the ex-Soviet republic and pledged solidarity in the face of foreign pressure.

05/07/2007

Source: **Associated Press**

Politics and Society

Belarus: 20 Church Workers Arrested in Crackdown



Police in Belarus arrested 20 Christian human-rights workers in two separate incidents this week, reports the

Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

On July 2, 14 activists were arrested as they collected signatures on petitions calling for restoration of a Catholic

church to active use. St. Joseph's church in Budslaw has been closed by authorities, and parishioners fear that it may be converted into a hotel. They were circulating a petition opposing that change, as well as a separate petition calling for changes in the country's laws governing religion. The 14 activists were released after several hours, but their petitions were confiscated.

The next day, July 3, police raided an apartment in Minsk and arrested 6 activists who were preparing literature calling for changes in the 2002 religion law.

They were also released after spending most of a day in prison, but their campaign material-- including computers and printers as well as religious literature-- was seized. Alaksiej Shein, co-chairman of the Belarus Christian Democrat Party, told Christian Solidarity Worldwide that the raid in Minsk was illegal, since police had no warrant. He said that the raid and the arrests were clearly intended to intimidate religious activists.

05/07/2007

Source: CW News

Belarusian Association of Journalists Holds Ceremony to Commemorate Anniversary of Dzmitry Zavadski's Disappearance

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) on July 7 held a ceremony in commemoration of the 7th anniversary of the disappearance of journalist Dzmitry Zavadski.

Some 15 BAJ activists gathered in front of the building in which Mr. Zavadski lived and put up portraits of the journalist, which carried the inscription "Where is Dzmitry Zavadski?"

BAJ Deputy Chairman Uladzimir Dzyuba said at the ceremony that this date is not only an occasion to commemorate Dzmitry Zavadski but also a day of professional honor because it is especially important for journalists now to continue the cause of their colleague Dzmitry Zavadski, that is, to report true information to the people. Mr. Dzyuba expressed hope that the disappearance of the journalist would eventually be investigated.

Volha Zavadski, the mother of the journalist, attended the ceremony. His wife, Svyatlana, could not take part, as she was travelling.

Dzmitry Zavadski, once Alyaksandr Lukashenka's personal cameraman, disappeared on July 7, 2000 at the Minsk National Airport, where he had arrived to meet Pavel Sharamet, his long-time col-



league and friend. Zavadski's car was found parked near the airport, but the 28-year-old journalist was never seen again.

His alleged kidnappers, Valery Ihnatovich and Maksim Malik, ex-members of Belarus' elite Almaz police unit, were sentenced to life in 2002, but they were found guilty of kidnapping, not murdering Dzmitry. The trial yielded no answer to the question as to what happened to him after he had been abducted. Although his body was never found, a district court in Minsk declared him dead in November 2003.

Dzmitry Zavadski had resigned from Belarusian Television in 1996 to join Russia's ORT television network and was later briefly imprisoned for his reporting.

The official theory of his disappearance is that Mr. Ihnatovich and his gang abducted the journalist in revenge for a newspaper report revealing that some Almaz commandos had fought for the rebels in Chechnya.

Mr. Sharamet argues that the motive may have been more serious. He testified at the trial in November 2001 that he had learned from former Prosecutor General Aleh Bazhelka about the involvement of top-ranking Belarusian officials in the abduction.

According to Mr. Sharamet, Mr. Bazhelka had told him that in the fall of 2000, investigators were about to solve the case. Some of the arrested suspects admitted that they had received an order to kidnap Mr. Zavadski from high-ranking officials with the Security Council of Belarus. However, Mr. Sharamet said with reference to Mr. Bazhelka, the investigation was put on hold by Mr. Lukashenka's order. Suspects either retracted their testimony or refused to answer investigators' questions. Some of the suspects were released and one of them, former Almaz officer Anton Kabzar, died under unclear circumstances in the spring of 2001.

Referring to the former prosecutor general, Mr. Sharamet told reporters in August 2001 about his suspicion that some of Belarus' top-ranking officials had dealt with deliveries of small arms and ammunition to Chechen rebels via Turkey and Georgia, using Belarusian secret services' officers who fought in Chechnya, siding sometimes with the Chechens and sometimes with the Russians. Mr. Sharamet said that an objective of the abduction of Mr. Zavadski could have been to find out what he knew about the deliveries.

At his questioning, former Prosecutor General Bazhelka denied that he had ever told Pavel Sharamet what he knew about the Zavadski case.

06/07/2007

Source: naviny.by

EU and Belarus

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Adopts Kiev Declaration

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe adopted a Kiev declaration on Monday.

The focus of the document is on energy security and the situation in Belarus.

It stresses the need for the use of replenished sources of energy and welcomes the goal of increasing a proportion of these sources to 20 percent by 2010.

The Parliamentary Assembly called on OSCE countries to create effective systems of control of energy crises and to fulfil their international obligations,

The Parliamentary Assembly voiced regret that Belarus'



presidential and local elections in this year's January did not meet OSCE standards.

The parliamentarians called on the Belarusian leadership to fulfill its international obligations and principles of a democratic European state.

It also called for amending the Belarusian election code to make it meet the

OSCE standards.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly stated the need for the adoption of a common system of migration regulation. It called on state institutions of member states to take the obligation to prevent "erosion of freedom".

09/07/2007

Source: Itar-tass

Economics

The Russian Line of the Belarusian Budget



Russia Dictates Conditions for Credit to Alexander Lukashenko

During negotiations on Friday with the Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorov, the Russian side laid out new conditions that Belarus must meet in order to receive the \$2 billion (up from \$1.5 billion) in government credits that it has requested from Russia. Specifically, Russia is now insisting that Belarus, which still has not taken changes in the cost of gas supplied by Russia's Gazprom into account in its budget, change its budgetary policy to ensure that this handout is final.

On Friday, Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorov traveled to Moscow for talks with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov concerning credits from Russia to the government of Belarus. Although the official reason for the Belarusian prime minister's visit was a regular meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Russia-Belarus Union, Mr. Sidorov spent most of his time emphasizing the terrible state of the Belarusian economy in the wake of changes introduced at the beginning of 2007 in the supply of oil and gas to the republic by Russia. In particular, Belarus cites the problems currently facing its economy to explain why it needs \$1.5-2 billion in credits from Russia in 2007.

According to the Belarusian prime minister, four months of higher prices for Russian natural gas have led to "an increase of more than \$458 million in the cost of importing [gas] to Belarus." In addition, according to his calculations, "as a result of decreased exports of oil from Russia since the beginning of the year, the Belarusian budget is approximately \$200 million short." That same day in Minsk, Belarusian deputy prime minister Viktor Burya also mentioned large losses suffered by the country's budget. Reuters News Service reports that Mr. Burya estimates that the new export tariffs on oil introduced by Russia on January 1, 2007 cost the Belarusian economy \$430 million between January and May of this year. According to Mr. Burya, Belarus, which at the beginning of May introduced a system of 90% compensation of customs tariffs on a give-and-take basis for Russian suppliers, expects to tackle the situation in the country's oil refining industry only in the second half of this year. The biggest macroeconomic challenge facing Belarus is a sharply negative trade balance with Russia: according to Sergei Sidorov, the trade imbalance grew from \$390 million in 2006 to \$2 billion in the first half of 2007.

Economics

The Russian Line of the Belarusian Budget, continuation ...

Mr. Sidorsky believes that Russia has an obligation to save the Belarusian economy from crisis: specifically, he maintains that the Russian government should offer credits to the Belarusian government to compensate for the budget shortfall. Negotiations on the subject are still ongoing. On Friday, before the session of the Council of Ministers, Mr. Sidorsky spent an hour and a half discussing the issue with Mikhail Fradkov during a bilateral meeting. One of the participants in the meeting told *Kommersant* that Minsk is now asking for \$2 billion in credits. According to the source, the new Russian position is that Belarus can receive credits only to "replace the cash deficiency in the budget."

In other words, Belarus must demonstrate to Russia that it will make changes in its budgetary policy to ensure that the credits are only a one-time helping hand from Russia that will no longer be necessary in the future. This is not likely to be an easy task: the Belarusian budget for 2007 still assumes that Russian gas supplied to the republic costs \$55 per

thousand cubic meters. According to the source who was present at the meeting, the current negotiations between Russia and Belarus are reminiscent of those between the IMF and Russia in the 1990s, when the IMF met Russia's request for credits with demands for slashed social expenditures and transparency in the country's economic policy.

Yet another question to which Russia has yet to receive an answer from Belarus is the country's future privatization strategy. In March 2007, Belarusian deputy prime minister Vladimir Semashko announced that Belarus "is ready to begin selling its enterprises." According to the privatization plan worked out by the Belarusian Trade and Economic Development Ministry, tenders may be held in 2007 for the sale of shares in several key oil refineries and petrochemical enterprises, including the oil company Naf-tan, the Mozyrsky refinery, Polimir, Belshina, and Grodnoazot. From the Russian side, Gazprom, LUKOIL, and Uralkaly have all expressed interest, but the prices quoted by the Belarusian government strike its potential

customers as unreasonably high. For example, Belarus hopes to get around \$1 billion for the sale of the company Belshina. Lower opening bids in the privatization of these state-owned assets could turn out to be a key Russian demand in exchange for the credits that Belarus has requested.

Sergei Sidorsky clearly lacked the authority to make such concessions to the Russian side. During his visit to Moscow, the Belarusian prime minister succeeded only in avoiding an outright refusal to his government's request. Mikhail Fradkov summed up the negotiations by saying that the possibility of providing credits to Belarus is "under consideration" but that "this requires a certain amount of time and attentive relations." There has been no time limit set on the latest negotiations. *Kommersant* will continue to follow the evolution of events.

02/07/2007

Source: *Kommersant*

Conflict with Russia Affects Belarusian Ruble's Stability

Belarus is to pay the maximum price for the Russian gas starting with July, while it paid only \$ 55 per 1 cubic meter of gas in the first half of 2007. Now not only has Belarus to pay \$ 100, but the country must compensate the lower price of January-June.

Meanwhile the state has already started evaluating the losses caused by the gas conflict with Russia. According to Interfax, the budget has lost \$ 200mln, since now Belarus sells less oil products abroad. Moreover, Belarus has to spend more on Russian resources and goods: it cost \$ 2bln more to purchase Russian resources and goods than to sell, within January-April.

- It affects the stability of our ruble, - economist of a Belarusian research

center Aliaksandar Chubryk told the newspaper "KP v Belarusi". - We must get currency somewhere.

The credit that Belarus requests from Russia can help out of this situation. That's the fastest and easiest way of getting money. According to the Russian newspaper "Kommersant", now it is a matter of \$ 2bln, not \$ 1.5bln of debt.

- *Why can a need for more money appear Belarus?*

- This is a cheap credit with a pretty low loan interest rate. If you come to a bank to get a credit for \$ 5mln, and they offer a very low, nearly zero loan interest rate, would you ask \$ 50mln too? - Aliaksandar Chubryk cited an example. - Even if Belarus allocates

the money borrowed from Russia in foreign banks, the Belarusian state will earn more than it will have to pay back to Russia.

Nevertheless, Russia hasn't decided yet whether it will loan such a lump sum of money to Belarus. According to "Kommersant", the Belarusians can get the credit only for substitution of the cash gap of the budget. In other words, in case there are no funds in the Belarusian budget for the expenses planned, Belarus will be granted the necessary amount of money.

- Our budget cannot have a cash gap of \$ 2bln. These terms indicate that the Russians don't want to let Belarus earn on their credit; they want their money spent on payments for their gas only.

06/07/2007

Source: *Interfax*

Economics

Revoking Trade Preferences Will Not Affect Belarus-Poland Trade Relations

The withdrawal of the EU trade preferences will not have significant negative consequences for the bilateral trade and economic relations, Ambassador Extraordinary and

Plenipotentiary of Belarus to Poland Pavel Latushko said today when answering the questions of reporters.

"If there are any negative consequences, they will hurt both the sides. Poland is a neighbour of Belarus, the countries have quite a big trade turn-



over and the mutual benefits of the trade and economic relations are obvious," the diplomat believes.

According to him, some duties which will be imposed on the deliveries of goods to the EU and to Poland in particular will be compensated by the Belarusian companies jointly with the Polish partners. "The consumers who buy Belarusian products will also pay for this," Pavel Latushko said. In case of necessity the exporters can redirect the deliveries to other markets, he said.

The ambassador noted that the Polish business did not welcome the withdrawal of trade preferences for Belarus. "We need to give its due to the Polish government who opposed the exclusion of Belarus from the EU Generalized System of Tariff Preferences," Pavel Latushko said.

"I think these duties will be abolished in the future. In any case the Belarusian diplomats in Poland will be working hard on this issue," the diplomat said.

09/07/2007

Source: BELTA

Belarusian Bank Enjoys Good Diamond Business



The National Bank of Belarus has sold since mid December 2005 1,491 diamonds weighing 259.34 carats to the tune of \$453,000, according to bank spokesman Mik-

hail Zhuravovich. Last June, the bank sold \$26,000 worth of diamonds.

It's not clear how or why the bank entered the diamond business, but it supplies the bank with a steady income.

The stones are 0.05 to 0.8 carat round cut diamonds, with 57 facets and accompanied by a gemological certificate. The bank, according to Zhuravovich, is considering expanding into princess cut diamonds.

10/07/2007

Source: IDEOX Online

Arrests in Lukashenka's Administration



On July 9 an investigator of the main directorate of preliminary investigation of the Belarusian Internal Affairs Ministry has filed a charge against a senior official of the Presidential Administration, a first deputy the ideol-

ogy department head, a head of ideology work coordination department Uladzimir Kholad. The BelaPAN has been informed about that by the Interior ministry of the country.

U. Kholad is charged with committing a large-scale fraud and inciting to a major bribe. Taking into custody has been chosen as a measure of restraint for him.

The Internal Affairs Ministry has also informed that U. Kholad was detained by policemen as a suspect on June 30.

10/07/2007

Source: Charter'97

Culture

Official Culture in Belarus: Listen to Bat'ka!

The Independence Day parade in Minsk is a grotesque sight. Held annually on the 3rd of July, the event attracts huge crowds of people and usually begins



with a military show featuring roaring tanks, swooping airplanes, and the perfectly groomed soldiers juggling their rifles.

They are followed by the acid-red tractors, combines, seeding machines and other farming mechanisms. In authoritarian



Belarus the sowing and harvesting campaigns are still regarded as "the battles for the crops". Then come the sportsmen. Ice-hockey players on rollerblades are playing the non-existing puck, tennis players are swinging their rackets at imaginary balls, wheel-mounted yachts are rolling down the asphalt road, strange figures on stilts act as chess pieces and, as the climax of the action, several dozens of athletes form some kind of vase with their bodies, which is slowly waving its tentacles. Pop singers



are opening their mouths in accordance with the pre-recorded soundtrack, trans-

mitted through the loudspeakers. And, above all this faked splendour there is Alexander Lukashenka with his stern smile, hugging a girl with red-and-green bows who is clutching flowers sent to the president "by the grateful people of Belarus".

Better than anything else, these parades reveal the essence of the official culture in the „last European dictatorship“. This is a primitive pop-product for the masses, serving to transmit simple ideological messages like „Belarus is an island of stability“ and „We shall never bow down to our enemies“. The ultimate ideological commandment reads „you shall have no other presidents before me“. The promotion of the official culture goes hand in hand with the repressions against independent cultural actors. The parade is just one example of the official cultural production in Belarus. While delivering the ideology to the masses, the regime uses many other public events, which are also broadcast by the state-owned mass media. The „Slavic Bazar“ is an annual music fest which brings together practically all state-sponsored



Belarusian pop singers. Every major political campaign, such as presidential elections or a referendum, is accompanied by the nationwide concert tour „For Belarus“, which reaches most of Belarusian towns and cities with its appeal to support the president. „Dazhynki“, the harvest fest, is celebrated each year in a different town of Belarus. The hosting city is always renovated beforehand. Facades of the central square get a facelift, a couple of sidewalks get covered with new bricks, and sometimes the ground is sprayed with green colour if the new lawn grass doesn't grow soon enough.

Then there is a big concert with the president attending.

Who is performing during these concerts? Among the rising stars is Polina Smolova, former soloist of the Minsk police orchestra. ([Polina Smolova, official web-site: http://www.polinasmolova.ru/site/index.php?lang=en](http://www.polinasmolova.ru/site/index.php?lang=en))

Another name is Irina Dorofeeva, who has sung during the open-air concert in front of the National library in Minsk on the 25th of March 2007. The concert was aimed at countering the opposition demonstration, scheduled for the same day. Her Marilyn Monroe-style photo taken during the concert stirred waves this spring in the Belarusian internet.



([Irina Dorofeeva, official web-site: http://www.irinadorofeeva.com/en/](http://www.irinadorofeeva.com/en/))

There are also old „stars“, such as „Siabry“ music group. Its frontman, Anatol Yarmolenka, performed quite a number of hit songs during the soviet times. Then, during the early years of the Belarusian independence, he sang to the lyrics by Zyanon Pazniak, who is now the opposition politician in exile. These days, together with his daughter Alesya, who shocks the public with her short dresses, ([Alesya video: http://www.alesya.by/video.php](http://www.alesya.by/video.php)) Anatol Yarmolenka performs the song called „Listen to Bat'ka“. „Bat'ka“ means „father“ in Belarusian, which also is the nickname of president Lukashenka. The song's lyrics speak for themselves:

Well-built and tough-composed,

Culture

Listen to Bat'ka ...

He won't teach you bad things.

Bat'ka can put everyone in order,

Bat'ka is cooler than the rest.

He will solve all the troubles

With a single movement of his hand,

He is reliable and confident.

Just a look at him is enough to understand

who's the master of our house.

LISTEN TO BAT'KA!"

„Listen to Bat'ka“ video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2s2XenL7N4>

(“Syabry”, official web-site: <http://www.syabry.com/>)

Among the high-rollers of the official culture there is omnipresent Mikhail Finberg, conductor of the National symphonic and variety music orchestra, who takes part in practically every single official concert and in any possible state ideology initiative. He also

seats in the parliament and even flaunts his shining smile in TV-commercials. There is also Angelica Agurbash, former model, now happily married to a Moscow



“butcher tycoon”. She was also one of the several failure entries from Belarus during the Eurovision music contest.

(Angelica Agurbash, official web-site: <http://www.agurbash.com/>)

In fact, the European pop song contest is something of a national sport in Belarus, with the president and the whole nation sending the contestant to the

Eurovision competition like astronauts on a space mission. Despite all the effort, these attempts have been rather unsuccessful. The last Eurovision contestant from Belarus was Dmitry Koldun, a young man with albino contact lenses. During his appearances on TV he frantically waved the official red-and-green flag and screamed out his many thanks to president Lukashenka for giving him a chance to take part in the contest and take the 6th position in the final.

(Dmitry Koldun on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcCZa3Am7IU>)



As you see, the official culture clearly puts an emphasis on music and other types of shows, with other spheres being rather neglected. The cinema is stagnating, the state-owned theatres can't stage innovative plays due to the state supervision. The regime tried to put literature under its control by forming the loyal Belarusian union of writers, headed by the former policemen officer Mikalay Charginets. However, the state support didn't help its members to start writing good books. In such conditions, the pop music remains the only major source of ideological influence, combined with shows, sports and television.

Oh yes, we forgot about the aggressively advertised state lotteries, which had become something of a nationwide mania in Belarus. The popularity of the lotteries is easy to explain. In the country, where most people are poor, the lottery creates an illusion that prosper-

ity is just around the corner. Simply go to the booth selling lottery tickets, buy yourself one, watch the weekend draw-



ing on television (which is also quite a show), and get rich! Just take your mind off your problems, don't think too much, relax. Change is bad, stability is good. Everything will be fine, as long as you listen to Bat'ka.



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